

An Unconventional Education: A Letter to Basic Writing Practicum Students

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ABSTRACT: This essay, in letter form, introduces graduate-level study in Basic Writing to practicum students. It situates teaching practices within Basic Writing histories and pedagogies, and invites readers to focus widely, read deeply, and keep writing. Included are lessons from Bernstein's experiences in presenting David Bowie's artistic and cultural contributions, reading James Baldwin, addressing racial literacy, and becoming a neurodiverse writer and teacher of Basic Writing.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; David Bowie; graduate education; interdisciplinarity; neurodiversity; pedagogy; racial literacy

Dear Basic Writing Practicum Students:

In this letter, I want to share with you the story of how I became—and why I am still becoming—a teacher of Basic Writing. I share these stories with you, in part, to consider the call for more teacher training and professional development in BW. But more significantly, I offer my experiences with the idea that your own stories also are worth sharing, and that expertise is not a stable commodity, but a shape-shifting and fluid approach (Anzaldúa) to the material realities of our field. Because of this fluidity, teacher training also is not a commodity or even an insurance policy for a better, more sustainable career. If you imagine that teacher training in BW will clear your path for a carefree journey through the academic world, then please reconsider. BW carries with it a mandate for advocacy, and not only advocacy for our students, but also advocacy for our courses and our programs, and of course for fostering growth in our students' advocacy for themselves and

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their communities, and by extension all of our communities (Kinloch et al., “When School Is Not Enough”).

Please note that I am writing to you not only as future (or even current) administrators, but in your primary role as graduate students and shapers of BW pedagogy—now and for the future. Your presence in graduate school at this present moment in the history of our subfield of Basic Writing and in the history of our nation is quite different from the world I found myself in as a new graduate student and a new teacher of basic writing more than 30 years ago. The resources available to each of us are quite different, certainly in terms of technology, but also in terms of economics.

In 1987, the year I taught my first basic writing course, education was still considered a public good. By this I mean that tuition reimbursement was more available and somewhat less competitive. Then as now, our professors warned us that even with a PhD in hand, we were not guaranteed a full-time tenure track position. But at that time, we were not yet required to own cell phones or laptops. Our housing costs were lower because gentrification had not yet hit our small college towns. Our undergraduate students could support their college educations with benefits from welfare, which allowed a four-year college degree to count as job training. In other words, times have changed.

As a graduate student, you might find yourself in conditions that necessitate planning for contingency and flexibility, for thinking outside the box of standardization (Sousanis and Suzuki) and work/life balance (Mountz et al.; McMahon and Green). You might wish to compartmentalize less and to integrate more, and to learn to advocate for yourself as well as for your students and your programs. This letter speaks directly to those needs.

If a career as an educational advocate is not what you had in mind, then let us reflect together on what advocacy can mean for you as a teacher. You are not here for the glory or the accolades, because those are few and far between. You are not here only for the teaching either, however, because as rewarding as the teaching is, you must learn to think beyond the classroom and understand the intersections of our and our students’ lives as members of larger communities. Your goal is to offer students the news that they may already know: inside and outside of our classrooms, they can learn to become their own best teachers.

ADVOCACY

You are here, then, to advocate for our students and ourselves always growing as writers and as human beings. Moreover, even as you are advocating for our students, you are also advocating for spaces in postsecondary education that will offer sanctuary for our students and their human right to an education, in which writing plays a deeply significant role. Writing will set into motion our students' movement toward freedom as writers and as thinkers (Freire).

That freedom will not happen simply through “accelerating” students (Adams et al.; also see the *Basic Writing E-Journal* Special Issue on ALP edited by Anderst et al.), nor through “stretching” students (Glau), to use two common course names that have become metonymic terms for reframing basic writing. We can invent as many new terms and new course names as we would like, but one basic truth remains: students by virtue of their placement in courses designated as “basic writing” are considered marginal to postsecondary institutions. Our job as teachers and as administrators is to become a forceful presence that creates visibility for our work and for the work of our students. As bell hooks writes, the goal is to move all of us from the margins to the center of the stories of our lives and of our communities.

MY METHODOLOGY

I believe it will be helpful to present my methodology in conceptualizing not only our practicum course, but also our course in basic writing, called “Introduction to Academic Writing” at my previous institutional home.

My methodology relies on deconstruction of the term “not college-ready,” a designation that postsecondary institutions employ to determine student placement into “remedial” writing courses. The existence of the remedial writing course contradicts the premises of diversity and inclusion by labeling students as “different from” their so-called “college-ready” peers. Moreover, through its label, the remedial course already becomes a target of elimination.

In order to avoid elimination, teachers may be under pressure to produce visible results in increasingly accelerated periods of time. The struggle for efficiency can point to a separation between the goals of students (learning to write for college) and teachers (producing as many passing students as possible in the shortest length of time). Such pressures, as Kinloch emphasizes, can result in: “. . . the damage of teachers silencing students

and/or asking them to abandon their lived realities and community voices upon entrance into classrooms” (“Difficult Dialogues,” p.110).

I deconstruct the term “not college-ready” to address reading beneath the surface of students’ texts. Reading beneath the surface allows students and teachers alike to discover their strengths in writing, which students can then develop and build on. We can discern and apply, with students, a significant shift to writing for new audiences and purposes. Along with this shift, students are experiencing years-long (Sternglass) and deeply embodied experiences related to the material realities of transitions to college. These transformations, observable over the course of the academic year in our campus’ two-semester “Stretch” writing course, are critically intertwined with students’ approaches and attention to the processes and products of writing.

In *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida describes writing and the process of writing in terms that invoke violence, or at least as a process that unsettles and produces vertigo. In this context, writing “denatures,” “wrests,” “estranges” (137); and is a “simulacrum that must be understood as a force—of an identity that is ceaselessly dislocated, displaced, thrown outside itself” (326), and the writing process understood as “a new form of dizziness” (326). This “new form of dizziness” holds particular relevance for analysis of writing created in developmental writing classes, especially when postsecondary institutions use standardized tests to categorize students as “not college-ready,” a designation that students would not use to describe themselves.

What Is Normal?

One of the first lessons I try to address in BW teaching and teacher training is an unpacking of “deficiency,” often by asking the question, “What is normal?” How is normal defined, and who is allowed to write that definition? This pedagogical approach helps establish the groundwork for students’ reinvention of themselves as writers. The placement methods of BW have defined students as outside the norm (Davis; Wood). Although conforming to the norm might allow for students to feel safe initially, this conformity is not necessarily the strongest attribute for transitioning to college writing, much less for fostering a sense of self-advocacy and community advocacy. Instead, writers at every level, all of us, need to reinvent ourselves, to grow, to learn, to absorb, and to become better writers. We need to defamiliarize what we think of as writing, to make the familiar strange again (Schmid).

THREE COMPONENTS OF GRADUATE TRAINING

Graduate training in Basic Writing for me has come to consist of three components, all of which evolved from what was absent from my own graduate training in BW:

Component #1: Question and Observe Practice

Question not only practices required by our program, but also our own emerging pedagogical practices. In *Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age*, Shari Stenberg recounts her program's process of developing assessment, which "allowed us a window into the roles of writing and research in one another's disciplines and classrooms, enabling us to think relationally and contextually about our responsibilities as writing instructors" (139-140). This feminist practice, as Stenberg suggests, can become a starting point for important questions regarding both programmatic requirements and classroom practices.

We can consider our work as always in process and subject to revision, observing ourselves and others without judgment, but always with the motivation to learn and grow from each other as teachers. In our own classrooms, we can take field notes on our own practice. For instance, we can jot down our classroom notes in the margins of our course planners, or in the note-taking app on our phones. We can invite students to take part in this practice through anonymous comments on discussion boards, or in other anonymous comments or questions that they can submit to us (Bernstein, "File Card Discussion").

Through these questions and observations, we can create and continually revisit a thick description of our practice. If we notice inconsistencies or blank spaces, we can take a moment to defer judgment and pay close attention to what we are learning from this process. After that moment, we can return to questioning and perhaps working toward revision of our own programmatic requirements and our own practices.

Component #2: Develop a Broad Rather Than a Narrow Perspective

Model your own education in teaching BW and your subsequent professional development activities using the processes that are part of a strong basic writing curriculum: Read widely and deeply, and process your reading through writing, to develop a broad rather than a limited perspective.

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The following guidelines can help teachers to more completely attain their instructional goals. More significantly, however, these guidelines enable teachers to offer a curriculum that encourages students enrolled in BW to contribute their unique perspectives in an intellectually engaging classroom environment:

- **Focus Widely:** My research and teaching rely on interdisciplinary insights from philosophy, history, music, and literary studies, as well as from Basic Writing Studies and Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies. Focusing on only one disciplinary approach allows few opportunities for ourselves as teachers to learn and grow outside the box, and this presents the potential to miss vital tools to interrogate how the system works or to develop empathy for how students learn and grow.
- **Cultivate Compassion:** For graduate students new to teaching courses institutionally categorized as basic writing, reading literary, philosophical, and historical texts can cultivate compassion for the life circumstances and positionality of students whose approaches to learning may appear quite opposed to our own practices and beliefs (Barbezat and Bush; Inoue; Von Dietze and Orb, drawing on the work of Nussbaum). These texts should include sources on racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz), anti-racist assessment (Inoue), intersectionality (Crenshaw), decoloniality (Tuck and Wayne Yang), translanguaging (Anzaldúa), disability (Davis), and queer theory/disidentification (Muñoz), all of which remain of deep concern for students enrolled in BW.
- **Read Deeply:** Also assign reading and writing in many genres. Pay close attention to students' questions and concerns. Remember that poetry and fiction can be read rhetorically, and that our students grow their abilities to read and think empathically and rhetorically outside the box through encounters with a variety of genres, including literary texts (Isaacs). Under no circumstances should the reading be narrowed to Writing Studies, or to the emergent field of Basic Writing Studies. Writing Studies and Basic Writing Studies, in their attempts to professionalize, systemize, and codify our discipline, often reify the systemic hierarchies that stigmatize placement in Basic Writing as a potentially permanent marginalized status.

- **Keep Writing:** Make sure that you keep up with your own writing practice, and consider making pedagogical/scholarly/creative contributions yourself. These contributions can take forms that you have practiced, and perhaps forms that are new to you, such as contributions to journals (e.g., *Journal of Basic Writing*, *Basic Writing E-Journal*), edited collections, or blogs. If your budget allows for it, presenting at conferences can offer additional opportunities. Venues for presentation in the field include (but are not limited to) the Council on Basic Writing, a Standing Group at the CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication), the AERA (American Educational Research Association), the NADE (National Association for Developmental Education), and TESOL International.

Component #3: Break Rules That Call to Be Broken

Do not hesitate to embrace a new approach or to break any rules that seem to have calcified. This includes the rules listed above, or those that appear to foster a self-satisfaction that our approach is the best approach for all times and in all situations. In a subdiscipline that historically and in our current historical moment must justify its existence to people inside and outside of Writing Studies, this third component holds particular relevance. Interdisciplinarity and openness to teacher/scholarship from the arts and humanities, the social sciences, education, and STEM can offer us insights for developing our work, leading to pedagogies and policies for creating equity for all of our students.

MY TRANSITION FROM GRAD SCHOOL

In 1993, as I undertook my first post-graduate teaching position at an urban community college in the Northeast, I began to research the many historical and cultural contexts, the *kairos*, of how I came to be educated as a teacher of students in courses institutionally categorized as “basic writing.” Most of all, I wanted to answer the question of how we can prevent catastrophes both *perpetrated* AND *perpetuated* by white supremacy from happening ever again (Rich). At the time, I had moved from a publically funded rural Northeastern doctoral granting institution to the largest city in the same state. While the university was located in a depressed town in

northern Appalachia, the college occupied space in a city that was deeply entrenched in financial crisis and racial and economic disparities.

The consequences of these disparities were evident every day in the deteriorating physical plant of the college's main building, and I could not help but compare that building to the well-maintained upstate campus from which I had recently graduated. I could not reconcile the fact that the majority of my students in the city were black, and the majority of my students upstate were white. In bearing witness to these imbalances, I became aware of the deep necessity for intersectional self-questioning (Valdes), and also for self-education. For this process, my graduate school courses in theory, American and comparative literature, and philosophy served me well.

From these courses, I learned to interrogate the shiny surfaces presented to me by employers and to seek out knowledge of the deep structures that constituted the material realities of students' lives. In the fissures between administrative commodification of college life and students' stories of struggle (with the welfare system, the criminal justice system, the healthcare system, the education system, the foster care system, and so on) grow the roots of basic writing pedagogies.

These roots are ever shifting, and often they are difficult to find. But it is the search for roots that keeps our teaching fresh. I cannot teach you a system or method that provides a 21st-century version of *The Key to All Mythologies*, an ongoing work in progress written by Mr. Casaubon, a professorial character in George Eliot's 19th-century novel, *Middlemarch*. There is no key to teaching Basic Writing, nor should there be. We come to teaching and learning BW with different motives and experiences, and what I hope to teach you is how and why to examine those motives and experiences, so that you are better prepared to work with and listen to students, no matter who they are, and no matter what and how they write.

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

In the fall semester of 2016, just past midterms, a sense of nervousness overtook the classroom. My students, traditional in age and diverse in background, struggled with complicated feelings about their transition to college, and about the upcoming presidential election.

Meanwhile in practicum, the field work/observation assignment was due. A graduate student who did not have a class of their own to teach asked about the possibility of visiting my classroom and teaching a lesson on creativity. The purpose of the lesson was to encourage students to think outside

the box of writing with templates and formulas. The graduate student hoped that these new college students in the first term of their two-semester Stretch writing program would be open to experimenting with poetry and music in order to foster new experiences for writing. I asked the students in Stretch if they were open to devoting an hour of class time to this lesson. Intrigued by the idea of a break in routine, the students agreed.

Before the practicum student visited the class, I took note of where we had been and where we were going. We had just finished a unit on the question “What is normal?” which included a presentation of David Bowie’s contribution to cultural awareness, particularly through his music and artistic presentation in *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (see Figure 1). Bowie provided a powerful and groundbreaking example of disidentifying, or separation of self from the conventional fixed-binary gender identities of mainstream culture, thus queering our classroom as a safer space for private reflection upon and group discussion of diversity (Muñoz).



Figure 1. “David Bowie in the Early 1970s: Newcastle Upon Tyne City Hall.” (Rik Walton) commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:David-Bowie_Early.jpg. Accessed 10 Oct. 2017.

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As part of that unit, we played and discussed the official video of David Bowie's "Starman," from the album *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. We also discussed the lyrics and noted references to "Starman" in contemporary settings. One of the presidential candidates included "Starman" in a series of songs played before and after stump speeches. The song also served as musical accompaniment to the film *The Martian*.

The students knew the song, but did not know Ziggy. I explained Bowie's deliberate appearance as an alien, and the shock value of the song in 1972, the year Bowie toured as Ziggy: the long red hair, the rainbow costumes, the non-heteronormative stance, and the hope embodied in the lyrics for the 1972 international teenage audience, of which I was a part (Trynka, pp. ix-xii).

I was nervous. Bowie had been dead for less than a year, and in that time I had once again absorbed his music through my skin, using it for solace in the midst of an ongoing depression that would not seem to lift (Bernstein, "David Bowie"). I had rarely brought his music or his lyrics to class before. But I could not think of a better illustration of the question "What is normal?" than the character of Ziggy, and it became apparent that some of the students were familiar with Bowie from the movie *Labyrinth*, or through the albums their parents played for them. *Starman*, and Bowie's performance as *Starman* performed by Ziggy, asked students to take on intersectional self-questioning. Ziggy was the alien who could save us from ourselves, if only we could tune in to his frequency.

By the time of the practicum student's visit, we were ready for discussions on creativity. Besides Bowie's work, we also watched Evelyn Glennie's TED Talk, "How to Truly Listen," in which Glennie discusses the processes of becoming a performer with profound hearing loss. Throughout these processes, Glennie emphasizes the deep significance of creativity, and how and why careful listening relies on pushing the senses and the imagination beyond what appears to be the most obvious or easiest responses to music, toward new experiences in education and in life. Because she is profoundly deaf, Glennie had to argue for her admission to the Royal Academy of Music in London. She suggests in her TED Talk the necessity of presenting such arguments in order to ameliorate injustice for future generations, and indeed, the processes for audition changed as a result of Glennie's efforts.

The practicum student's presentation focused on "Clapping," which is an additional percussion piece performed by Glennie. In both the TED Talk and "Clapping," Glennie's performances were addressed as a means of introducing the place of creativity in academic writing. The first-semester

students in Basic Writing offered their responses, of which I provide two samples:

A music education major:

The Evelyn Glennie “clapping Music” video was very cool, it is a typical piece of what musicians call organized chaos. From the Music you could tell she was in 4/4 time, and she was at about an andante tempo of I’m guessing 64- 78 on a metronome. To continue, the Rhythm had an accent on one, a beat on the “and” of 1,2,3, and 4, and she was also doing triplets on top of those. Her hands were in a 2 to 3 ratio with the melody (or in this case the almost melody) in her right hand, and her steady beats and tempo in her left hand. Her shape and dynamics were in a grow and release form which added what musicians call “musical color” to the piece because it created a different tone to the instrument. Also adding to the “color” of the piece was her technique and her placement of her sticks and hands.

An engineering major:

The video we watched made us focus really hard in order to hear and see what the composer wants us to feel. The sound of the instrument is a clank instead of a thump or wind instrument. The pattern is simple and repetitive. Very catchy still have it in my head. There’s a noticeable difference in the tone between a low and high clank. The pattern is so systematic and mechanical that when I hear it the picture I see is an old car that’s stuck on cranking. The ticking and thumping of a v8 engine the same pattern but many different sounds I can relate that to the song. In the youtube video Evelyn Glennie is playing an instrument that produces a strange sound and wants the reader to listen. During the YouTube video I discovered that while she was playing there’s two ways to hit the instrument to get two different sounds out of it. Another thing I noticed in the video is her dress and the stage lights. She wears a yellow dress and has blue stage lights. While in the other clips of other performances she wears red is on the floor and has pink mood lights.

These writing samples are an indication of the depth of thought that can be expressed by students regardless of their level of expertise in writing

and their placement in a remedial writing course. A placement in remediation, no matter what its label in the course catalogue, is far from a desirable requirement for our students—or for anyone’s students. Immediately, at the beginning of their college careers, first-year students are thrown back into the messiness of test results, and frustrations about having to take an extra semester of writing. Fear of failure often plays a role in students’ performance, because placement in BW is always already a sign of perceived failure.

While names like “Stretch” and “ALP” (Accelerated Learning Program) may be an attempt to alleviate or even eliminate the stigma of remedial placement, we need to remember that these names were put in place to persuade administrators, colleagues, outside funders, and other stakeholders of the efficacy of these interventions (Glau; Adams et al.; also see the *Basic Writing E-Journal* Special Issue on ALP edited by Anderst et al.), which supports the efficacy of our work as WPAs, teachers, and graduate students. But we need to look at these names from the point of view of first-year students, and view the nomenclature with pathos for students who experience the emotional as well as the material realities of enrollment in any BW course. For students who have come of age in an era of educational austerity and precarity, the arguments for additional course hours can feel like economically fraught barriers rather than conduits to learning and moving forward through their educational programs in a timely manner (Fox).

This reasoning propelled me as a graduate student to the discipline of Basic Writing. I had started in Art and Art History because my undergraduate grades and GRE scores were initially too low to be offered a teaching stipend in English. Besides, I had a Modern Languages BA.

Although the connections to writing seemed straightforward to me, they did not seem nearly so to my professors, who were invested in power struggles to quantify their own relevance in departmental politics. The political dimensions of the job seemed to take a great toll, and this is often the case with the political battlefields where BW skirmishes are fought and fought, over and over again. Students have their own battles in surviving a system that so often mitigates against their academic success. For these students and for any student, it is not a personal culture of poverty that they have inherited (Payne; Bommer et al.), but a societal culture of material poverty that devalues raw creativity, even as it praises polished innovation.

From the perspective of first-year students, there remains a deep disconnect between their placement test scores and the amount of academic labor and financial capital they must invest in the transition between high school

and college. For students, BW feels like a step backward, even if it is offered for six hours of credit for transfer or graduation, or accelerated, or integrated with reading or another course. BW is not where students expected to end up at the beginning of their college careers, and no amount of administrative explanation or metaphorical obfuscation can take away the frustration of the material circumstances of students' lives.

Students may express frustration with a BW placement, but every so often we may encounter a moment of recognition, such as this student's reflection:

I've always struggled with writing all throughout middle school and high school. I just get in front of the computer screen and kind of freeze and I can't think of what to write. When I came to college I was nervous for WAC 101 because I thought it was going to be really hard and strict writing, considering I thought I was bad at writing; but when I got to WAC 101 and started doing my journal entries and once I submitted my first writing project, I realized it wasn't that hard. Turns out WAC 101 wasn't strict writing, it was creative writing and I enjoy writing a lot more now. So it feels good to be a writer as of today.

Let me be clear. Our class is not a creative writing class. What our practicum student provided, and what I tried to support, was an atmosphere of openness and an expectation that students would achieve much more than they might have initially thought possible. For many students, that "much more" is a reconnection or a first connection with language, audience, purpose, and context, which are among the many components of a first-year writing class. What has changed between the last decade of the 20th century and the second decade of the 21st century is the writer's connection (or lack thereof) to their own thought processes. No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have taught students how to fill out the templates necessary to pass tests, and the students who have played by the rules to complete high school have had limited experience with thinking outside the box in their lives at school.

Our students in BW often struggle without these templates, yet that struggle is a necessary first step to finding a voice that will connect them to their own thoughts and to moving toward a more engaged and committed presence in their writing.

DEVELOPING RACIAL LITERACY

The classroom vignettes that offer success in application of creativity to everyday life present more challenges to creative thinking when applied to developing racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz). According to Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, “Racial literacy is a skill and practice in which individuals are able to probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representation in US society” (386).

In the second semester of Stretch, concerned about the need to address racial literacy, I asked students to create an essay that drew connections between difficult texts that initially seemed completely different to students: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”; Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”; and texts that students would choose themselves. The results challenged my thinking on this subject, and changed my approach to discussing race in practicum and in Stretch Writing courses. I now introduce the conversation about racial literacy in the first semester, through reading and writing about the works of James Baldwin (Bernstein, “Why is Writing So Hard?”), and then focus on additional examples of protest literature in the second semester (Bernstein, “Creative Projects”).

The experiment of addressing racial literacy in the second semester was not entirely a success, and the results seemed to fall across racial lines. In the first semester unit on creativity, students had an opportunity to think outside the box across categories of difference, such as the previously mentioned example of David Bowie and gender fluidity. Yet the evolution of racial literacy proved more ambiguous.

During the second semester, students wrote on race as follows:

Sample 1:

In MLK’s letter he talks about the injustice in Birmingham and how the justice system is wrong because they are denying his legal rights to peacefully protest. In the mountaintop speech he says “True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.” without justice peace is impossible and there isn’t any justice when MLK was sent to jail for peacefully protesting. MLK is the prisoner in Allegory that escapes and sees the real truth. He gets to see how the world really is and the real truth of life. MLK gets to the mountaintop and sees the truth and sees the civil rights movement succeed and gain their rights.

Sample 2:

It was about 53 years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech that, described a dream he had, and still today it resonates with individuals around the nation, giving chills with the amount of passion it was delivered with. Looking deeper into Martin Luther King's work to the work that, we have covered in class so far specifically Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Comparing both of these works we see a connection of intolerance, how it can consume an individual like, being trapped in a dark cave, and only through the initial blinding light of education can you escape this way of thinking. Today, we see that Martin Luther King's dream has not been fulfilled, and African Americans are still discriminated against.

Sample 3:

After "Martin Luther King Jr's Letter from Birmingham Jail 1963, Sam Cooke wrote a song "A Change is Gonna Come." This song talks about how a boy is told what he should and shouldn't do because it is not the right thing. But he still believes and knows there will be change and takes his life day by day and wants to see the day things change in the world. In the verse, "Then I go to my brother, And I say brother help me please, But he winds up knockin' me, Back down on my knees, There been times when I thought I couldn't last for long, But now I think I'm able to carry on." This explains how Dr. King relied on the president at the time and he didn't help because he was afraid how the nation would react, but that didn't stop Dr. King from continuing his movement. It also shows how the prisoner goes back to tell the others but is not believed.

This experiment did succeed in allowing students to grapple with difficult texts (Sealey-Ruiz), and to attempt to address new concepts and complexities within and between those texts. Yet some of their attempts to do so are presented in quick summations and simple "happy" resolutions to complex issues of race and social injustice that are in actuality still ongoing. For other students, who have already experienced racial injustice first hand, the hope for a better future remains contradicted by the intransigence of the present.

The imposed structure or template of a comparison/contrast essay will not work for synthesizing specific details that, for many students in this

cohort, remain deeply emotional. The emotional labor of studying these issues seemed especially evident as these students wrote in the spring of 2017, when political shifts in the United States rendered discussions about race especially difficult (Grayson, p. 144). The cohort students grapple in this writing with subjects from which many of the adults around them had retreated (Coates, “The First White President”).

Racial identity development (Tatum) can take decades of exposure to injustices that are outside the experiences of many students and teachers (myself included), who grew up in segregated white communities, or mixed communities with school districts that reify racial segregation through ability tracking or the charter school movement (Fine). For people who identify as white, part of this process includes not merely calling out the unearned benefits of white privilege, but also persisting in working to end the racial hatred of white supremacy through our long-term commitments to teaching, scholarship, and personal and community action (Bernstein, “The Nice White Lady”; Green, “Difficult Stories”; Winans, “Cultivating Critical Emotional Literacy”).

PROGRESS AND UNCONVENTIONALITY

Progress in writing, as Marilyn Sternglass observed in *Time to Know Them*, her 1990s study of student writers at risk at City College of New York, is not linear, because students’ writing lives are not linear. Students must make adjustments for the material realities in their lives outside of the classroom, which often include full-time or equivalent employment and care for family members. Sternglass noted that students frequently must make the choice to drop out to deal with the material realities of their lives, and then return to their studies in times that they hope will be more stable.

Similarly, Paul Attewell and David Lavin conducted a longitudinal study, published in 2009, to chart the impact of higher education for working-class and poor women and women of color enrolled in the first cohorts of open-admissions students at City College in the early 1970s. After the passage of several decades, the women involved in this study reported economic and social mobility not only for themselves, but also for their children and grandchildren (Attewell and Lavin).

Nonetheless, in the ensuing years, the complexity of students’ lives and the long-term gains of higher education have been overlooked in the interests of institutional efficiency, and BW no longer exists on the four-year campuses of the City University of New York (CUNY) system (see Fox;

Gleason; Pepinster Greene and McAlexander; Otte and Williams Mlynarczyk; Soliday; and Soliday and Gleason for additional discussion and examples). The losses of “access to the kinds of cultural capital that higher education offers” (Fox, p. 4) need to be accounted for, and as M. Rose, Shaughnessy, and Rich have suggested, we need to pay deep and abiding attention to the material realities of students’ lives.

A student who tests into BW has already broken with conventional-ity, because BW has been defined in the last two decades not as a vehicle for educational equity (Inoue), but as a placement of last resort for students categorized as deficient by their institutions. But the reasons for this categorization do not mean that the student is deficient, only that the category is inadequate for addressing and ameliorating pre-existing societal conditions of education inequity. A typical student in BW is not typical. She may have attended low-performing schools, he may have worked for many years or served in the military before beginning or returning to college, she may have diagnosed or undiagnosed disabilities, they may have come from a community or family that, for reasons of race, class, gender, religion, sexuality, language background, immigration status, and so on, is identified as outside the mainstream of higher education.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND OPENNESS

Given the current complexity of our students’ lives, my guiding practices and principles as a basic writing teacher, and now as a basic writing practicum teacher, rely heavily on Components #2 and #3 of graduate training noted above: interdisciplinarity and openness (Banks), and a willingness to challenge and break the rules when necessary. Perhaps this move is rhetorically risky in a field that has only recently emerged from out of the shadows and elitism of traditional 20th-century English departments, and in our current political climate.

Yet the works that still resonate with us, the documents that we still continue to study and hope to teach to others, were composed during similarly difficult times (such as King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” James Baldwin’s “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity,” Albert Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus,” and Audre Lorde’s “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”), and often with great risk. Study of these historical writings and their substantive complexity is important for not only creating an inclusive environment for our students but also engaging them in the kinds of intellectual work necessary for progress inside and outside of the basic writing

classroom. We also benefit from such challenges as we consider the precarity of our own work in the field of BW. Nonetheless, if we wish to avoid elitism ourselves, we will need to divest from the insularity of Writing Studies as a discipline, and learn how to power through the often profound discomfort of the problems posed by the material realities of courses institutionally categorized as Basic Writing.

JAMES BALDWIN: EVERYBODY'S HURT

Longstanding societal inequities, as Baldwin suggests in “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity,” require us to reach out through writing to connect with one another. This especially holds true for Baldwin through the inherent contradiction brought about by segregation and inequality: it is very difficult to connect with one another on a human level. Nonetheless, Baldwin attempts to offer a means to this end: “Everybody’s hurt. What is important, what corrals you, what bullwhips you, what drives you, torments you, is that you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive. This is all you have to do it with” (52).

In our own time, as well as in Baldwin’s, some educators may mistake the embodiment of that hurt as students’ deficiencies as individuals. The deficit model paradigm suggests that students need to overcome a so-called “culture of poverty” (Payne; Bomer et al.), or to “unlearn behaviors” that some BW educators see as detrimental to students’ success in postsecondary education (Bernstein, “Qualifications”). In this iteration, students (and by extension their communities) are always already understood as deficient, and in need of training to conform to systems that, in Baldwin’s terms, have led to human isolation and degradation. In “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin continues: “For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness” (104).

Baldwin suggests that we do not deny the existence of inequitable and cruel laws and policies. In our own field, we can count as inequitable those policies that lead to postsecondary basic writing placement. Such policies include (but are not limited to) housing segregation and school segregation, and segregation within schools of students with language differences and cognitive processing differences, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Coates; Satter; Kozol; Orfield, Frankenberg, et al.; Alexander; M. Rose). Consequences of these material realities play out every day in the lives of poor and working-class people and people of color in the United States, yet in the lives of many

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white and middle- and upper-class people, such forces remain invisible, or even nonexistent.

Yet BW allows us to envision a place where the different lived experiences of the world may collide and perhaps even connect. In Baldwin's terms, we forge experiences of triumph so that there will be new stories to tell.

This vision of BW is not as easy to achieve as we might hope. For all of postsecondary education's talk of diversity, inclusion, and excellence (Watts), BW courses like ALP and Stretch are not meant to encourage difference, but to replicate pre-existing social norms that fail to examine binary oppositions of "virtue" and "deficit" (Frank). Frank rereads Baldwin to try to reconceptualize these oppositions; he states that, "with love, we see possibilities in our students that even they may fail to fully appreciate." In other words, in his reading of Baldwin's work for its relevance to contemporary teacher education, Frank suggests that we consider possibility rather than deficiency, and that we allow love to infuse our work as teacher educators.

MORE BOWIE

In August 1980, 37 years ago, I did not know what basic writing was. Unemployed, done with college, and living on the outskirts of Chicago, I accompanied friends to watch David Bowie's performance in Bernard Pomerance's play, "The Elephant Man" (see Figure 2). "The Elephant Man"



Figure 2. Blackstone Theatre Program, David Bowie in Pomerance's "The Elephant Man." Special Collections, Chicago Theater Collection-Historic Programs, Blackstone, 31 Aug. 1980.

An Unconventional Education

tells the story of Joseph Merrick (called John Merrick in the play), a man with physical differences so stark that even a charitable audience was challenged to accept Merrick's humanity. Less charitable persons exploited Merrick's appearance in freak shows until Merrick was found by Dr. Frederick Treves. Dr. Treves brought Merrick to a London hospital for more sustainable care for his body and attention for his developing mind. Bowie played the character of Merrick.

This story of difference and escape from the freak show (Garland-Thomson) unsettled my world, not the least because Bowie played the title role. He did not wear makeup or use costuming to convey physical difference (as John Hurt would do in the film based on the play), but instead used his training in mime to embody the suffering of body and mind. Bowie wore a white loincloth or sometimes a hospital gown and his voice creaked and rattled (*David Bowie Is*; Trynka, pp. 357-58). I still hear echoes of that voice when I think of Bowie, especially since his death in January 2016. The voice grows clearer in memory.

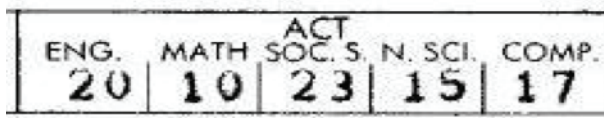
I never heard Bowie perform in concert, but "The Elephant Man" seems like the deconstruction of Ziggy Stardust, from glam with all its glitter and colorful clothing to that plain white loincloth, the halting movement of the body, and the sound of the voice offering great depth and dignity. In Chicago, the recession of 1980 was in full swing and the steel mills were closing. Segregation was evident still, as it is to this day, and the only job I could find with a BA in French was at a suburban call center. I was mortified.

But I remembered Bowie, I remembered how he worked his bones and muscles to convey distress, and also dignity, and how the voice he adapted for the character of John Merrick claimed agency even as the freak show marked the Elephant Man as deficient in every way.

I would not teach my first BW class until 1987, thirty years ago. Yet it was Bowie's ability for transformation, his beautiful glamorous Ziggy reformed into the stark beauty of John Merrick, in minimal costuming and sparse makeup, that inspired me as I began teaching and that I remember to this day. Similarly, BW offers opportunities to develop two attributes that I admire in Bowie: unconventionality and reinvention.

KNOWING THE SCORE

Here is another story of unconventionality and reinvention, directly related to the question of who belongs in postsecondary education.



The image shows a scan of an ACT score report card. The card is rectangular with a double-line border. At the top center, the word "ACT" is printed. Below it, the categories "ENG.", "MATH", "SOC. S.", "N. SCI.", and "COMP." are listed in a row. Under each category, a score is printed in a larger font. The scores are: English: 20, Math: 10, Social Sciences: 23, Natural Science: 15, and Composite Score: 17.

ACT				
ENG.	MATH	SOC. S.	N. SCI.	COMP.
20	10	23	15	17

Figure 4. Susan’s ACT Scores (1975, Personal Archive) English: 20 Math: 10 Social Sciences: 23 Natural Science: 15 Composite Score: 17

The scores shown in Figure 3 above represent the results of my second attempt at the ACT test forty-two years ago and are the scores that appear on my final college transcript. When I received these scores from my guidance counselor, he strongly suggested that I scale back my college aspirations.

I left his office as quickly as I could, walked as steadily as possible to my empty twelfth-grade English classroom, found a seat, and wept uncontrollably.

The composite score of 17 felt particularly frustrating (Kapelke-Dale). The readings and problems on the ACT did not have an urgency of context, and I forgot them the moment the test had ended. I do remember feeling bored, frustrated, and anxious, but that was normal for me. While I already understood that my “normal” did not always match the normal of many of my peers, or the expectations of many of my teachers, I had not expected the ACT to assign a score that was an underestimation of my abilities to learn and grow.

My teacher arrived well before class began and found me there. She asked why I was crying, and I responded by showing her the scores from the retake, and shared with her the guidance counselor’s words. “Of course you’re college material,” my teacher countered. “You will find a place and I will help you.”

At present, some learning specialists see divergences in test scores as an indicator of cognitive processing or other learning differences, even as ADHD remains underdiagnosed in girls and women. My ADHD diagnosis came very late, but also just in time for me to appreciate the struggle that so many college students face in the transitions, gaps, and fissures between our classrooms and the rest of their lives. My diagnosis also came with the understanding of the role that white privilege plays in my life, and the responsibility to work in coalition to create positive, equitable, and lasting social change (Bernstein, “Occupy Basic Writing”).

UNCEASING EFFORT

Teaching Basic Writing allows me to create a space for not only learning the art of writing, but also, through the action of writing, to become aware of our own challenges, the challenges of those who came before us, and the challenges of others in order to form new connections within ourselves, with classmates and peers, and within and beyond our own communities. Albert Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" explains this process as "unceasing effort." Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to roll a rock up a mountain for all eternity, an impossibly depressing task. Yet the last time I taught Sisyphus, a student found an insight so moving that they wrote it on a t-shirt: "He is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock." I included the t-shirt in my quilt "All of Our Grievances Are Connected" (see Figure 4) and considered the meaning of that rock. Perhaps it is time to bring Sisyphus into the classroom once more.

We gather together in this historical moment to discuss our teaching of a course called Basic Writing. With "unceasing effort," we can work to invoke its more vibrant and sustainable future.

Keep moving forward, dear Basic Writing practicum students, and take good care.

Sincerely,
Susan

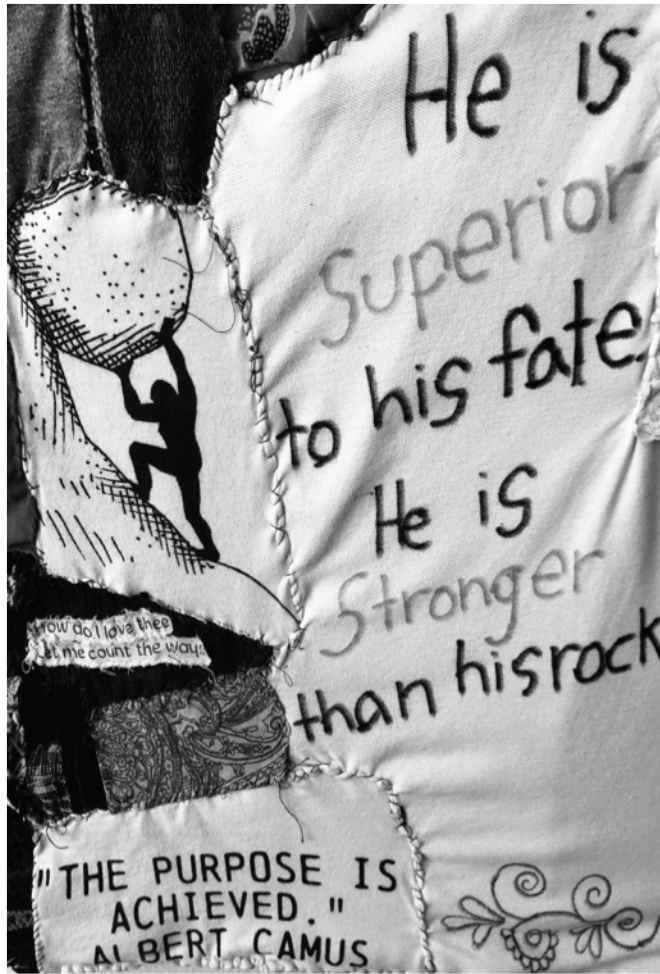


Figure 4. From Bernstein Quilt “All of Our Grievances Are Connected.” Detail of Student-Made Patch, “He is Superior to his fate. He is Stronger than his rock” (Camus).

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